

C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 002456

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/21/2015

TAGS: EG JO PGOV PREL ECON ETRD SY IT

SUBJECT: ITALY CONDEMNS SYRIAN-LEBANESE BORDER BLOCKAGE

REF: A. STATE 135904

1B. ROME 1023

1C. ROME 1732

Classified By: A/DCM Scott Kilner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. MFA officials agree that Syria's continuing blockage of its borders with Lebanon constitutes economic harassment, but they prefer to abide by a recent EU statement condemning such actions rather than make a separate public declaration. The officials also expressed Italy's disappointment at being excluded from the Core Group on Lebanon (Ref C) and asked the US to engage Italy more in discussions on Syria/Lebanon. End summary.

12. (C) Acting Pol-Mil Counselor delivered Ref A demarche to Luca Ferrari, MFA Office Director for the Middle East, and Giorgia De Parolis, MFA Desh Officer for Syria, on July 22. Agreeing that the Syrian government's continuing blockage of its border with Lebanon constitutes economic harassment, Ferrari opined that Syria is "flexing its muscles" toward the incoming Lebanese government, but, because its actions were far more detrimental to its own economy than to Lebanon's, Syria would not be able to continue this harassment much longer. Ferrari said the Italian government is unlikely to issue any public statement condemning the Syrian actions, but would send "discreet" messages to the Syrian government. Referencing the conclusions of the July 18 GAERC (in which the EU called on Syria to, among other things, allow for the smooth circulation of goods between the two countries), Ferrari explained that Italy prefers to let the EU make public declarations on this issue.

13. (C) Ferrari took advantage of the meeting to voice Italy's disappointment with its exclusion from the Core Group. Italy had complied with US requests to cancel high-level meetings with Syrian government officials (Ref C), he said, which left Italy in a weaker position to tell the Syrians anything. In return, Italy had expected the US to include Italy in its discussions on Lebanon, at the same level as France and the UK. Ferrari said the US was making a mistake in letting France "get the upper hand" and delaying the international conference on Lebanon until this fall. Meanwhile, he continued, Lebanon is forming a new, pro-Syrian government that includes members of Hezbollah (to whom he said Italy would refrain from sending a "welcome note").

14. (C) Ferrari also noted that he and others in the MFA's Middle East Bureau had just met with representatives from the Arab League countries the day before, but that discussions focused on the new bomb scares in London and the kidnapping of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad. He said that Italy would, however, raise the border issue in future discussions with Arab League members.

15. (C) Comment. The MFA is clearly unhappy with Italy's exclusion from the Core Group despite Rome's efforts to support US policy on Syria. As Ferrari put it, "we will pass your message on Syria to our Arab friends, but please tell your European friends (i.e. France) that we need to be included in discussions on Lebanon." At US request, Italy has twice canceled planned visits of FM Shara'a despite Rome's preference for engagement, has actively pushed for the EU to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and was the only EU country to press for the inclusion of the disarmament of Hezbollah (in addition to Syrian withdrawal) in an EU Council declaration on Lebanon earlier this year. In our interlocutors' view, Italy has been a stronger ally than France, and yet it is with Paris that we are discussing the way forward on Lebanon. Engaging Italy more actively on Syria/Lebanon would help ensure Rome's continuing strong support, especially on the key issue of isolating Syria.

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